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Snakes, Iguana Eggs, Tropic Sun Not A Vacation For East Texans

By DOTTIE ROARK
Staff Writer

Imagine a two-week vacation in southern Belize.

After backpacking all day through rain-soaked jungles, you can dine on corn cakes and unborn iguana eggs, if you're lucky. In the evening, you can expect sweet dreams while lying on the dirt floor of a one-room hut, listening to the snakes slither through the thatched roof.

Doesn't sound like much of a vacation, does it? No, but that hasn't stopped several Tyler doctors, dentists, pastors and students from journeying two to three times a year into the southern Central American country of Belize on a mission of mercy.

Amigos Internacionales, based in Athens, has been organizing trips to Belize since 1971, said Dr. Kerfoot Walker, medical director for the group.

Walker, director of Tyler Smith-County Health Department, who has participated in over a dozen of the excursions, just returned from a trip early this year with 24 other Tylerites. Seven others, including three from Athens and four from Florida, also went on the 16-day expedition.

Walker has already started enlisting participants for the next trip, planned for the Easter holidays. Although everyone pays his own way, and everyone goes on his own time, Walker is not promoting the trip as a vacation.

It's not what Belize can do for you, but what you can do for Belize.

With their own equipment and medicine, the doctors and dentists travel from village to village treating the Indians who are virtually without modern medicine. Walker said there are no dentists in the whole district of Toledo, a section of rain-forests in Belize where the missionaries go each year. There is one doctor in the district, but he does not go to the villages, Walker said, the villagers have to go to him.

One of the common problems they encounter in the villagers, who are mostly Mayan Indians or a related faction, is anemia, Walker said. Much of it is because there is very little protein in the diet. Most of the women are anemic because they are married by age 14-17 and usually have borne six to 10 kids by age 26, he said.

Other problems the missionary doctors treat include intestinal parasites, malnutrition and bacterial infections, he said.

Professionals working with Amigos Internacionales are given the same authority as Belizean professionals, in accordance with an agreement Amigos has with the Belizean government, Walker said. Amigos is now working to get the government's approval to do immunizations.

Belize was a British colony for about 200 years, but it established its independence in September 1981, Walker said. Therefore, most of the children and young adults speak English. Some of the older adults speak a Mayan dialect.

The main diet staple of these people is corn. Walker said they have corn cakes or corn tortillas and rice, and everything is flavored with onions and "very hot" pepper. Fish (cooked with the eyeballs, which are considered a delicacy), tropical fruits, armadillo, a rodent-type animal and red or black beans are occasionally served.

A big favorite is the iguana and iguana eggs. The eggs are taken from pregnant females, which are also cooked. The eggs are quite delicious, Walker said.

The pigs raised by the Indians are not eaten, he said. They are considered a cash crop and are taken to the market to exchange for hard goods.

How the group began going to Belize is an interesting story.

Amigos Internacionales was founded in 1968 by three men from Athens, Jim Wren, Ed Nuako and John LaNoue, who decided they wanted to do Christian work outside of their church.

The non-denominational group started by taking volunteer doctors and dentists to the Texas-Mexico border. When a Baptist group later began providing border doctors, the Athens group looked for another project.

After seeing an advertisement in the "Wall Street Journal" for a hospital for sale in Belize, they started talking to Belizean government officials. Amigos could not afford to buy the hospital, but they secured an agreement from the government to work in the Toledo district.

The group that went on the Jan. 2-10 excursion included Dr. Tom Cooper, ear, nose and throat specialist; Herb Barbee, chiropractor; Ned Luscomb, former nursing supervisor's aide at Mother Frances; Mrs. Jo Green, dental assistant; Bill Fowler, associate pastor of Tyler Christian Fellowship; and Walker.

Not all the missionaries are professional medical workers, Walker said. Doctors' wives and students often participate.

The next trip is planned for the Easter holidays at a round-trip cost of $450 — this includes food and lodging. Walker said he expects the flying costs to be reduced because Houston is going to start offering a direct flight to Belize. The flight now goes to New Orleans and to El Salvador.

For more information, call Dr. Walker, 566-2242.

John Wayne was spotted by director Raoul Walsh at Hollywood's Fox lot in 1928. Wayne — then named Marion Morrison — was working as a studio prop man.

(—Courtesy Photo)

MISSIONARIES THINK ABOUT IGUANA FOR DINNER (OR LUNCH)
David Poole (L), Tyler, Larry Smith (R), Athens, In Belize

Family Takes America To China

By JOHN RODERICK
AP Special Correspondent

KUNMING, China (AP) — Neglected for 13 years during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, Yunnan University's English department — and its contacts with America — have been revived by a spirited American family of three, a mother, her son and daughter.

When Elisabeth Benson Booz and her 24-year-old son, Paddy, descended on Kunming early in 1979, their biggest problem was acceptance.

Some 50,000 American airmen had been based here in World War II, but the newcomers were the first foreigners since 1960, when the Soviet Union withdrew its technicians.

They were also the first Americans in this capital of Yunnan province since 1949, the year China went communist.

Katherine Booz, 20, who succeeded her brother Paddy at the university last year, recalls: "One of our problems was fitting into the landscape. Wherever we went there were stares. They stared at us and we stared right back."

No wonder. The Boozes were an interesting sight as they tooled around town on bicycles, Elisabeth weaving uncertainly through the traffic, Paddy in Mao jacket and matching trousers, Kathy with her good looks and flaxen hair.

The Chinese soon got used to them, partly because the stares were met with smiles, and perhaps also because they seemed to be everywhere at once. Students, professors and townspeople appeared amazed by the energy of this small Yankee family.

Kunming, called the "city of eternal spring" because of its cool climate, and Yunnan province are famous as the home of 25 minority tribes, the most in all China. After a while, the locals were referring to the Booz family affectionately as the 24th minority tribe.

Elisabeth, known to friends as Ben, has spent most of her life abroad, about a third of it in Asia. Her father, a Kansas banker, met her English-born mother in Yugoslavia while financing a railway. She lived with her parents in Africa and other places, including Switzerland, which she still calls home.

Later she married an economics professor who worked as a teacher and consultant in various Asian cities. After his death, this restless mother of five grown children — already accomplished as an artist and as the author of three children's books — refused to sit still.

Ben was angling for a job in Indonesia when she heard about a chance to teach in China. It was one place she'd never visited, but which had always fascinated her. She undertook a close study of Chinese history.

"When I heard that China needed teachers," she recalls, "I thought, why not? This is a good chance to help and to learn at the same time."

What the Chinese got was a package deal. She asked Paddy, then 21 and a university student-instructor in America, to come along. When he left Kunming in February 1981, Katherine took his place.

"Our life here is very upbeat," said the daughter. "We meet a lot of Chinese and a lot of other foreign experts. It is a beautiful climate with wonderful food and the people are warm and intelligent."

On arrival, Ben was appalled by Chinese ignorance of Western culture and politics. In the cultural revolution, foreign books, magazines, newspapers and other influences were banned. The university had no library worthy of the name.

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